

National Affairs by Claire hoy ? So much for the sacred trust

One of the primary issues which really hurt the Tories during the last election campaign was the notion that they treated Canada's veterans poorly.

You may recall that former Vaughan MP Julian Fantino was eventually hounded out of his Veteran's Affairs portfolio after opposition parties and veteran activists made a persuasive case that the Tories, who talked a lot about respecting veterans, weren't exactly up to the job.

Thus it was that well into the campaign, Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau, recognizing an easy target when he saw it, surrounded himself with uniformed men and women on a stage in Belleville and vowed that if he became prime minister he would live up to the 'sacred trust to our veterans and their families' by launching a \$300 million annual program to invest in our retired servicemen and women.

Of all the groups in society pushing for help from government, it's hard not to argue that those people who put their lives on the line in defence of our nation are not among the most worthy.

And so it is, as everyone knows, that Trudeau did indeed become prime minister, to some degree on the strength of his commitment to veterans. Though the Tories did, in fact, do a lot of good work on the veteran's file, the fact remains that a series of highly publicized missteps by Fantino and others created an image of an uncaring, arrogant government that talked the talk but refused to walk the walk.

No doubt veterans across the land, upset with Stephen Harper's government, were joyous at Trudeau's electoral success, particularly in light of the Tories' insistence on fighting a court case launched by six wounded veterans in 2012 arguing they were being unfairly shortchanged by a new Tory policy on pensions.

The government argued, rather coldly, that the case should be dismissed because the government does not have a special obligation or 'social covenant' with veterans.

Trudeau, during his Belleville campaign extravaganza, said he would not only introduce a bill recognizing the government's 'sacred obligation' to veterans, but would re-open the Veterans Affairs offices closed by the Tories (mainly because they weren't serving many clients) and he also promised to immediately bring in the notion of lifelong pensions for injured veterans.

So here we are, almost a year after Trudeau made his 'sacred' pledge to veterans and 'guess what' ? little has changed, except, of course, the Liberals benefited from the notion that the Tories were being mean to veterans and the kind-hearted Liberals would right that horrid wrong.

None of the things Trudeau promised have yet come to pass.

Worse, the much-maligned court case launched by the wounded veterans in 2012 has not been dropped by the Liberals.

Indeed, Justice Department officials are carrying on the same arguments they used under the Tories, and even asked the court to have the veterans' case dismissed on the grounds that the government does not 'despite Trudeau's electioneering pledge' have a sacred obligation to veterans.

Late last week, the wounded veterans claimed a victory of sorts when Justice Harvey Groberman of the B.C. Appeal Court ruled that his court will consider 'contradictions' between the government's current legal position and the stance taken by Trudeau during the election campaign.

Veterans Affairs Minister Kent Hehr sloughed off criticism of the Liberal duplicity by claiming the court case 'is part of an ongoing lawsuit, which began many years before we came into office.'

That, of course, is true. But there is nothing other than a lack of political will (plus a lack of focus during a non-election period) stopping them from ending the court case as promised and living up to their electoral promises.

Despite all the brave talk about veterans, there is also the current case of 94-year-old Petter Blindheim, a Second World War hero who won six medals of honor fighting for the Allies, has lived in Canada since 1945, is close to death, yet is still being refused a bed at the Camp Hill facilities in Nova Scotia (which currently has 13 empty beds) because of a bureaucratic technicality which Trudeau and/or Hehr could correct with one stroke of a pen.

Yet, so far at least, they won't do it, turning their backs on a man, while not technically an Allied soldier, who risked his life and saved many Allied lives through an incredible act of heroism on our behalf.

Talk, as they say, is cheap. And election promises are worth even less, despite Trudeau's blathering about his 'sacred' duty.

